

**Commencement Address at the 368th Commencement
of
The Ohio State University**

by

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It is a singular honor for me to have this opportunity to address you today; a good part of my life has been dedicated to higher education in one form or another and most of it has been right here at The Ohio State University.

It is customary for a commencement speaker to offer sage advice sprinkled with a bit of humor, and a friend of mine actually did give me some useful platitudes, such as great opportunities lie ahead of you if you stay focused, or there is nothing you cannot do if you set your minds to it, and so on.

But, rather than continue in that vein and develop those ideas more, I thought I would be truer to myself if instead I gave you a glimpse of what I believe makes universities such remarkable institutions. You have just spent four – or so – years at a great university, so you probably have your own ideas about this.

But for me, having a large concentration of people – faculty and students – who dedicate themselves to learning, and who lead an intellectual life of inquiry, for me, that is the key to what makes universities the great institutions they are. Universities are remarkable bastions where the pursuit of knowledge can take place unfettered, where faculty and students alike can engage in the business of creating new knowledge, codifying existing knowledge, and dispensing knowledge to willing learners; The Ohio State University has been such a place for me over the years, and hopefully for my students and for all of you too.

In some ways, I like to think of myself as a simple professor, spending my time teaching classes, and meeting with and advising students, but also doing research as I try to create, organize, and disseminate knowledge beyond the classroom. In my research, I concern

myself with the minutiae of how we use our language and how it and other languages change over time. I know these are topics that many would not find interesting, but understanding them, I claim, adds to our overall appreciation of what it means to be human, since language is a central part of how we define ourselves in the world and with regard to others.

Some of you may have taken linguistics classes and if so, my words will be a reminder of what I hope was a pleasant and informative experience; for those of you who have not had that good fortune, I will take advantage of your captive status here today and talk about language change --- this is, after all, perhaps the last chance to give you a taste of what it is I and other professors do at this huge place of higher learning.

My classes mostly deal with esoteric topics, and it probably will not surprise you to learn that I have never spoken before as large a crowd as this one. For some reason, my classes in the Slavic Department on the dialectology of the Balkan Sprachbund or in the Linguistics Department on diachronic morphology or on the history of Vedic Sanskrit do not get crowds like this. Go figure!

In this way, I feel somewhat like Arlo Guthrie at Woodstock (and I mean the 1st Woodstock, in 1969, an event that occurred when I myself was about to enter college as a freshman). Guthrie, upon seeing the hundreds of thousands assembled for “three days of fun and music and ... nothing but fun and music”, said:

“I don’t know uh like how many of you can dig how many people there are, man. Like I was rappin’ to the fuzz, huhh, right, can you dig it? Man, there’s supposed to be a million and a half people here by tonight. Can you dig that?”

Clearly he was impressed with the size of the crowd, just as I am here today!

But I cite Guthrie for another reason, for it sets up mention of another place where I invoke his words: at the beginning of a textbook I co-wrote on language change. I suspect you can see why: I think you’ll all agree that some of what he said, like “Rappin’ with the fuzz” or “Can you dig it”, are words or phrases that are not used much today, certainly not by a 22-year-old college-age kid, which is what Guthrie was in 1969, or at least not with the same meaning (*rap* for him referred simply to talking, not to a particular style of music, for instance).

So in this simple case of some spontaneous words from the past compared with what you might hear in a similar context today, barely 40 years later, we can see evidence of language change. The words are still with us but they are just not used in the same way or with the same meaning.

And more examples can be found all around us, many of which are quite salient to us here at OSU.

For instance, how many of you know the name of the suburb just west of Columbus whose name starts with an “H”? Some of you may even be from there. It is “Hilliard”, of course, or is it?

As it turns out, that town was originally called “Hilliards”, short for “Hilliard’s Station”, since it was founded along a railroad route. Sometime after the 1950s, it came to have its present designation of simply “Hilliard”, even though some older residents still keep the –s. Thus there has been a subtle but real change in the suburb’s name and so too in the usage of Central Ohioans in referring to that place.

An illustrative example that hits even closer to home has to do with one of the OSU fight songs that we all so gladly and proudly sing to cheer on our beloved New-Orleans-bound Big 10 champion #1 Buckeyes! The song is “I Wanna Go Back to Ohio State”; I will refrain from singing it since I have no voice, but it goes something like this:

I wanna go back to Ohio State
To old Columbus town,
To the stadium to hear the band,
By far the finest in the land ...

and so on. The last line of that song is

'We'll win the game or KNOW the reason why'

and it has always intrigued me. I’ve wondered what it really means, and in particular why we would **not** know the reason for a loss at the end of a game, taking the word *know* in its now-usual sense of having knowledge of or understanding something. To me, a more sensible meaning here for *know* would be ‘find out’ or ‘learn’, that is “We’ll win the game or LEARN the reason why”. As a historical linguist, I wondered if *know*’s meaning had shifted at some point. Here, an authority, the *Oxford English Dictionary*, provides an answer: One meaning given for *know*, now obsolete, is ‘learn though inquiry, find out’, obviously now supplanted by the other more familiar meanings.

Clearly, that line was written when this meaning of ‘find out’ was not obsolete. In this anomalous meaning of the fixed phrase *know the reason why* compared to the current meaning of its individual parts, we see evidence for change in our language, in the change of meaning of this very common verb.

Although these isolated examples of language change are admittedly not particularly earth-shattering, they do have significance, in a few ways.

First, after years of studying the phenomenon, my considered opinion is that language change on a large scale is really nothing more than the accumulation of changes on a small scale, and one never knows which small adjustment will catch on and spread to become something larger in scope.

By “large scale”, I mean the sorts of changes that have led to English and German becoming different languages even though they share a common Germanic source, or to French and Spanish being so different even though both spring from Latin. But these large differences --- the result of changes that affected each language individually as it split off from a common starting point --- started with small alterations, with small differences between speakers in matters of detail. Small changes are precisely what we see distinguishing older and younger speakers regarding *Hilliards* versus *Hilliard*, or different chronological stages of English, in the case of *know*.

And so, at the risk of reneging on my promise not to be preachy here, let me say that a life-lesson can be drawn from language change, namely that big things start small. Remember the old adage from the early Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu about a journey of a thousand miles beginning with one step! So even if your first job is not the CEO position you might want it to be, starting small and making a difference wherever you do start is likely to lead to larger, bigger, and better things. This is as true in life, for instance in effecting change in society, as it is in effecting change in language.

But back to language change.

A second way that these small changes from our immediate world here in Central Ohio are significant is that they conform to general principles of language change that are observable elsewhere.

For instance, in the loss of *-s* in *Hilliards* an unmotivated part of the name was eliminated --- once “Station” was dropped from *Hilliard's Station*, what was the *-s* doing there? It was unnecessary and so it too was dropped. A similar case of change in a word whose apparent parts don't add up is the loss of an *-s* in the word *pea*; in earlier English, it was originally, as a singular noun, *pease*, with an unexpected plural-like final *-s* even though it **was** singular.

So too with the example of *know*: here, a change in the general meaning of a word is not carried over into a more fixed use as the change in *know* did not spread to *know the reason why*. Interestingly, the same thing happened with the change of *pease* to *pea*, since the fixed usage in the nursery rhyme *pease porridge hot, pease porridge cold* preserves the older singular form, one that has now been lost in ordinary usage.

And, this account of *know* and, for that matter, *pease*, is significant since it reveals something quite telling about language and about the degree of attention we as humans typically pay to things around us.

That is, we tend to focus quite naturally on the here and now, on the most immediate, the most salient things at hand; language change, with its “starting-small” and highly localized sorts of developments, teaches us that lesson. It’s not that we can’t see widely or envision things on a large scale but rather that when you get right down to it, what is most relevant for us is the most immediate and the most local.

And we get this from a few examples of language change involving Ohio and Ohio State material.

And, to venture onto my soapbox again, this offers us another life-lesson, namely that to have a broad vision, which is clearly important to making progress or to planning effectively, we need to work to counteract our tendency to see the world with blinders on or within a limited field of vision. It may not be easy to do so, but it is definitely worth the effort.

To return to more linguistic matters, these examples show us that language in Ohio is linked to language elsewhere in terms of basic governing principles.

And, this basic unity to language everywhere also links us with speakers in centuries and millennia past, as my next example makes clear.

While we can learn about language change by simply observing the present or the very recent past, including events within our lifetimes, as we have seen, we also learn by looking at materials from the more distant past, such as historical records and literary works. This long chronological reach shows that the human experience has been pretty constant through the ages.

For instance, the University of Pennsylvania Museum has a collection of Greek letters written on papyrus from the early centuries of the common era. In one letter from the second century AD a father offers advice to his son who is away studying: he urges his son to give his fullest attention to his studies as that is the recipe for success in life. We don't know what in the son's original letter provoked that response, but we can make some reasonable guesses, and we can suppose further that it contained something quite familiar to us now in messages home from students, since the father adds at the end that he is sending along some supplies the son needs, including, of course, some money.

Thus, we can see clearly here that the more things change, the less things change, and that we are tied to our ancestors in the distant past, as our descendants in the future will be tied to us, all by the commonality of human experience.

As a final note, I would like to depart from my theme of language change and simply offer a bit of insight from linguistics into a pressing issue before us at this great institution: the status of the definite article *the* in *The Ohio State University*. We are proud here to emphasize *the* and to use it as a distinctive mark of university identification; indeed, in that sense it shows how linguistic features can take on a social significance, with *the* marking a particular attitude towards and pride in your soon-to-be alma mater. We are not just "an" Ohio State University --- any old one --- but "the" Ohio State University! But is *the* part of the name or not? It certainly is officially, as it is emblazoned on our logo, but our acronym is O-S-U, not T-O-S-U, and there is some ambivalence even in official usage: the Medical Center's website, for instance, has "Ohio State University Medical Center" across the top of the page, not "The Ohio...." and the same is true for other websites associated with official arms of the university.

Linguistic analysis can add fuel to this great articular controversy. Based on the ways words in English combine to form phrases and sentences, an argument can be made that *the* should **not** be taken as part of OSU's name. So, while we can say either

a student from The Ohio State University

or: a student from Ohio State University

if we move the university name before the noun *student*, we have to omit *the* and say:

an Ohio State University student

but not: *a The Ohio State University student.

That is, only one article can occur in the slot before a noun, and *the* in *The Ohio State University* competes for that slot, just as if it were a free word and not a meaningless piece built into the university's name.

Will this settle the controversy? Probably not, but it shows how linguistic argumentation can inform an area of inquiry near and dear to all of us.

By way of concluding, let me pick up on the theme of inquiry and suggest that inquisitiveness is what led to these discoveries of facts about the language around us and its development and patterning. Though small, they *are* discoveries, and it is the spirit of inquiry that pervades this great university and the intellectual life it stands for that led to these discoveries. And, I trust, it is that spirit of inquiry, nurtured here throughout your years at OSU, that you will take with you as a lasting gift your college education has given you.

Good luck to all of you and thank you for your attention --- none of this, by the way, will be on any quiz, I promise!